



MOUNTAIN *of* TROUBLE

By Maj Gregory S. Laffitte, Moody AFB, Ga.

Much of my youth was spent in the outdoors doing the typical weekend campouts with the Boy Scouts and the occasional long-term summer camp. My dad and I spent countless hours on the water fishing and duck hunting anywhere from Louisiana to Michigan. I guess you could say that the outdoors was a place where I truly felt that I was in my element, and was confident that I could handle just about any outdoor situation – the proverbial “anywhere, anytime” type of attitude.

Camping and hiking in the woods prepares a young man and makes for an ideal transition to military life, so it came as no surprise to my parents when I announced that I would join the Marine Corps after graduating from college. A thorough course in land navigation with all of the map reading, terrain association, declination angle computations, and the like were the standard for brand new second lieutenants attending The Basic School at Quantico, Virginia. My Marine

training was fantastic, and I graduated as a land navigation machine. The tools were in place. I could take a map and navigate from point A to point B with my eyes closed. Anytime, anyplace standard complacent attitude.

I spend as much time with my kids as I can. We enjoy outdoor activities like camping, fishing and hiking, so receiving orders to Nellis AFB, Las Vegas, Nevada, with all of its outdoor recreational opportunities was a dream come true. Several years had passed since my days as a Marine second lieutenant to the morning when I planned to take my kids out for a morning hike in the mountains just north of Nellis AFB. You could see the range where we were headed that particular morning from the front yard of our quarters in base housing. I had been through the area in my truck, and studied a map of the terrain features and the heights of the various mountain tops before the hike, so I was very familiar with the basic lay of the land.

It was January third and my kids were still enjoying Christmas gifts and

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their remaining time off from school when I began to pack for the hike. I had planned to surprise my kids on Christmas morning with the gift of a go-cart, but the only way to keep the gift a secret was to bring the go-cart home and hide it in the garage; the only way to fit the go-cart in the back of my truck was by taking the spare tire out and leaving it behind in my garage. The go-cart was a huge Christmas morning surprise and the kids were having a blast driving their new go-cart around the yard that morning as I began packing for the hike, but somewhere along the way I experienced a complete loss of “situational-awareness” and failed to put the spare tire back in the truck.

Around Nellis, early January means mild desert afternoons with fairly cold nighttime temperatures. I packed a small one-burner backpacking stove, a bag of rice, two cans of kidney beans, and a mess kit for four people in my backpack. I also threw in two canteens of water and a flashlight (even though we weren’t staying out after dark), the map from my office as well as my lensatic compass. My middle son was so excited about the trip and had his bag packed as if we were planning to summit Mt. Everest. He packed extra socks, shirts, and pants as well as extra matches, water, and had even thrown in a warm sweat shirt and our popular military camouflage poncho liner. I remember telling him that we’re “only going to be gone for a few hours and that I did not think that all of his ‘extra’ gear was really necessary but that if he really wanted to carry all that ‘stuff’ then it was his decision.”

As it turns out, he was much wiser than his father. My older son and younger daughter had prepared by wearing their hiking boots, jeans, and long-sleeved shirts. Again, this was just

supposed to be a simple 4- or 5-hour trip and then return home because dad was going to the movies with mom later on that night.

Before we left, I told my wife exactly where we were going and that we would definitely be back by 4 p.m. to make our movie date later that evening. Everybody was packed and loaded up. I told my wife good bye and after a kiss and a hug, we headed for the mountains.

The Bureau of Land Management oversees thousands of acres open to the public for mountain biking, four-wheeling, and just about anything else you would want to do in some pretty rugged and remote terrain. The area we were headed to had numerous mountain peaks ranging from 2,000 feet to almost 6,500 feet. I had picked out one known as Gass Peak, which was right at about 6,000 feet and was easily recognizable due to the numerous antennas placed on its highest point. We were driving on some fairly rough trails, generally limited to four-wheel drive type vehicles, and had finally arrived at the spot from which we would begin our hike. The location was about 14 miles from the nearest paved road, and while pulling into a place to park the truck, I began to hear an obvious hissing noise coming from the rear of the truck. Upon further inspection, I discovered that a hole in the side-wall of the left rear tire was the source of the hissing and that within just a few minutes the tire had gone completely flat. It was about this time that I had regained my “situational awareness” by realizing that I had not put the spare tire back into the truck before we had started for the mountains. A perfect case of excessive motivation!

Not wanting to spoil the day’s activities, I told the kids we would go ahead with our hike up Gass Peak

and then come back down to the truck and hike out the way we came in. At the time it seemed like a sound plan, besides, “anytime, anyplace.”

The hike to the top was uneventful. We made extremely good time and we were having a blast. Up on top there wasn't a cloud in the sky; it was nice and cool and we could see all the way out to the Vegas “strip”; life was good. I fired up my backpacker's stove and cooked up my version of hobo chow with rice and kidney beans. We all had generous portions and after relaxing an hour or so, I decided it was time to head back to the truck. This is where old dad lost his “Situational Awareness” once again.

I remembered that we had parked the truck at least 14 miles from a paved road which would take me to a phone to call home for help. Standing from where I was on top of Gass Peak, I could actually see the road where I would be able to find a pay phone to make that call. A classic case of “get-home-itis” was being born!

I attened out my 1:200,000 map and did a quick study of the lay of the land. The map provided a great deal of orientation information, but was not a good choice for actual land navigation when it came to depicting contour intervals. The map didn't provide me an appreciation of the ruggedness of the surrounding terrain, and I was falsely convinced

that there was a safer and shorter route back to the main road. I figured “why back track all the way back to the truck and then hike 14 more miles back to the main road when we could save a lot of time by bush whacking?” Bad choice!

The sun sets early during the winter months and the desert is a place where it can get real cold in a hurry. We hiked along one ridge line after another, up one draw and then down another. Each time we would reach a place too steep and too dangerous to attempt to descend, so we would retrace our steps and search out another way to go. My kids were tough, but they eventually began to show signs of fatigue. We watched the moon come up, and rested until it had sufficiently illuminated the landscape; enabling us to continue down the mountain. It was really amazing how moonlight would cast shadows obscuring and giving false impressions of the lay of the land.

At 1 a.m. we heard the sound of what we thought was a helicopter. I knew that the only way a rescue helicopter was going to find us was if we were in a location where they could see us. We continued along a ridge line and eventually found a spot where we thought we could be seen. We were too tired to go any further and with each step it was getting more dangerous to proceed. Cold, tired, and hungry we found a spot and settled in and waited for the sun to come up. It's one thing to go out and make bad choices that impact yourself, but it's an entirely different matter when you make bad choices

time, from the mountain. The rescue crew knew the general vicinity of where we were and had reason to believe that something had happened based upon our failure to return as planned. In fact, the only reason we were found was because I had told my wife where we were going and when we were supposed to return.

My personal confidence in orienteering and high degree of comfort in the woods created a complacent attitude which led to a potentially dangerous scenario for me and my children. The age-old cliché of “it will never happen to me” was alive that day right along side his best friend “get-home-itis.” Fortunately, it hadn't rained, because the temperature was in the teens, so we were lucky to only be tired, cold, and hungry. This experience now serves as my personal reminder to follow the principles of Risk Management and to always strive to maintain solid Situational Awareness.

Our overnight ordeal has been talked about amongst family members for years now, and though it was a big adventure, I have vowed to never let my guard down again. Since then we have had numerous outdoor camping trips, and I am happy to report that all have ended without the assistance of a helicopter rescue. 🦋

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that impact other people, and more importantly I had placed my children in a very dangerous situation.

A rescue helicopter from the Clark County Sheriff's Department found us at 2:30 a.m. and plucked us, one at a